

The Cold War, Post-Cold War, and the Academy

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM AN ORAL HISTORY OF RUSSIAN AND EURASIAN STUDIES

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In *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts*, historian David Engerman portrayed contemporary Russian and Eurasian studies as insular, ineffectual, and—ultimately—irrelevant. Charles King's [article](#) in *Foreign Affairs*, "The Decline of Area Studies: Why Flying Blind Is Dangerous," painted a bleak picture of area studies as financially flatlined, save for the lucky few working on issues of interest to the defense establishment. Following crises in Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia-US relations, commentators routinely lament the lack of area studies expertise within the academy and policymaking communities.

An oral history project sponsored by the Harriman Institute of Columbia University gives us the opportunity to take stock of such assessments. Contrary to conventional wisdom about area studies in the post-Cold War era, the project shows how networks of Russian and Eurasian experts pioneered and shaped emerging fields such as the study of nationalism and human rights while others moved into new professional spheres, which were searching for ways to engage with the region's new states—including the corporate and non-governmental organization sectors. This memo traces these developments through the stories of our narrators. It argues that area studies is alive and well, despite some missed opportunities in the 1990s, and it concludes with recommendations to build on this rich legacy with new partnerships and new ways of looking at the region.

The Making of the Oral History

When the Harriman Institute at Columbia University kicked off its oral history project in 2015, the stakes were high. The Institute was heading toward its 70th anniversary and

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many area studies institutes in the United States were in a period of protracted soul searching and institutional uncertainty. This made it all the more important to use the oral history as a tool to gauge the relevance of the decline thesis, understand important turning points and diagnose the shortcomings of area studies today. The first phase undertook twenty-six interviews with Harriman Institute directors, professors, staff, alumni and senior affiliates whose experiences span six decades in Russian and Eurasian studies. The cast of narrators was diverse—left and right leaning, academic and policy-oriented, humanities and social-science focused, more and less sympathetic to Russia—to ensure that what we learned would be of interest and relevant to the broader field of area studies.

The Soul of Area Studies

The standard “rise and decline” thesis on any subject necessarily involves simplification. A fall or decline—whether an empire or a discipline—is all the more dramatic if juxtaposed to a so-called Golden Age of privilege and power. The problem with such narratives is that they oversimplify, ignore past turmoil, and give us a sense of insecurity about our present state. The narrators in the oral history offer an important correction to this era when towering figures dominated the field and held close government ties.

The Russian Institute (as the Harriman was known before 1982) was blessed with a core, multidisciplinary faculty that in the early days either had wartime experience or unique experience doing research in the Soviet bloc. Geroid Robinson—the founding director—had done research in Russia and led the USSR Division of the Research and Analysis Branch of the Office of Strategic Service in Washington, DC. The Division would also call on Phillip Mosely and John Hazard to serve, and they subsequently assumed the helm of the Russian Institute, becoming part of the first generation of Sovietologists. By virtue of their near monopoly on government contacts and rare field experience in the Soviet Union, it would have been more remarkable if this early core of Sovietologists had accomplished anything less.

Although the Russian Institute trained many students who would go on to government jobs, there was a certain aloofness and insularity to how its leadership and faculty perceived themselves. Elizabeth Valkenier worked closely with Mosely in the 1960s and [remembers](#):

“President [Lyndon Baines] Johnson once invited him to some meeting and it coincided with a seminar that Mosely was giving, so he said no. That seminar came first. Can you imagine anybody [doing that] these days?”

Many narrators in the oral history worked closely with this core of now deceased

faculty, and with the passage of time they recall memories that are poignant and powerful, but far from idealistic. Cooley [reflects](#):

“I think when I hear Cold War mentality, there’s a kind of romanticizing of the Institute and the good old days. Well, the good old days were not all that good for a lot of communities. The women involved in the institute or emigres who were distrusted. Not everything was that rosy.”

The Russian Institute and the broader community of Sovietologists in the United States faced external challenges too. In the 1950s, *Pravda* [accused](#) the Institute of being a “hotbed of American slanderers” despite having faculty who looked on the Soviet world more favorably than others. Among the many surprising stories in the oral history are accounts of the turmoil in campuses in the 1960s. In 1968 as protests, boycotts and sit-ins took place across the United States, business as usual became impossible. Narrators recall violent incidents, nervous breakdowns, and every sentence faculty wrote or spoke was open to challenge. Susan Heuman [recalls](#) the paralyzing ridicule that Andrew Cordier, the head of the School of International Affairs, faced when he said, “‘Are we here to get an education or make a revolution?’ I think he lost his audience as soon as he uttered those words.” Edward Kasinec bluntly [explains](#) that Harriman faculty created political camps:

“So there were the acolytes of this professor or that professor. And it would spill over into personal relations, among the students. Well, you’re a student of X, so therefore your political views are slightly to the right. You therefore sympathize with the émigrés who are working on the campus and ‘who are devious.’ They are not telling the truth about the reality of the political situation in Eastern Europe. And they should be avoided.”

Not unlike today, money was in short supply across the field. Robert Legvold [describes](#) the 1970s and much of the 1980s as a time of shortage in Soviet studies—shortage of money, students and research. And while under the directorship of Marshall Shulman the institute became more nationally prominent and immersed in policy matters like arms control and foreign policy, some narrators like Loren Graham [lamented](#) the loss of emphasis on “cultural questions” and noted that “mixing roles” as intellectuals and policy advisors may have constrained their ability to critically reflect on the directions the U.S. government was taking in its dealings with the Soviet bloc. As Jack Snyder [recalls](#):

“Zbigniew Brzezinski, Marshall Shulman, Seweryn Bialer, these people were [...] kibitzing with the people who were running the real world. They had connections in government, business, media, and so, they were naturally oriented in that direction. Whereas... the Institute for War and Peace Studies was more academic.”

Even in the best of times, Soviet and Russian studies faced cyclical challenges from within and without. What took place at the end of the Cold War was less a “fall” and more a diffusion of research communities and institutional mission.

Enter the Wild 1990s: What Next?

The collapse of the Soviet Union naturally created an existential crisis among experts who panicked about what they would study for the rest of their professional lives. Soviet studies lost its *raison d’être* but also its protected status within and outside the academy.

Not all panicked, however. Alexander Motyl, a specialist on Soviet nationalities, [says](#):

“When the place fell apart [laughs], I remember breaking open a bottle of champagne and doing a jig in the middle of the day. It was one of the greatest moments in my life.”

For him and a core of other faculty, this was a chance to take advantage and make the most of the collapse to meaningfully study subjects and people that had been marginalized during the Cold War, including Ukraine. The establishment of fifteen independent countries splintered experts, and many refocused their attention on the new states. Ron Suny further [explains](#), “Before the late 1980s, no one cared about the non-Russians.” What would later be called the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) came into shape. Motyl says:

“The first conference we did in 1988 or ‘89 was called ‘The Soviet Nationalities and Gorbachev.’ Then the next one was called ‘Soviet Nationalities against Gorbachev,’ and I believe the final one was called, ‘Soviet Nationalities without Gorbachev.’”

Indeed, the trajectory of ASN itself testifies to how interest exploded; the organization’s membership doubled from 1994-1997 and its journal *Nationalities Papers* grew in influence.

The growth of the human rights field was another unplanned outcome of Soviet collapse. Jeri Laber’s oral history sessions offer a rich account of how some Soviet studies experts reshaped the field of human rights. While there had been long-standing interest in Soviet dissidents, this reflected a narrow approach to human rights. Laber [describes](#) how work in human rights evolved from the Carter Administration, through Soviet collapse and on to the internet era which redefined the profession. The stories she tells are poignantly summarized in a casual comment, “To save someone’s life—it’s not a small thing.” Rachel Denber, who would become the Deputy Director of the Europe and Central Asia division at Human Rights Watch, shares stories about working in a

number of conflict settings including Chechnya and Nagorno-Karabakh. Denber [recounts](#) that the organization operated in an environment of understanding from the Russian government in the mid-1990s as she freely accessed archives and conducted interviews with the FSB and even the Ministry of Defense until the second Chechen War.

Several narrators deployed their expertise in the private sector. Peter Charow exited academia to explore opportunities in trade and the nascent Russian private economy. The founding director of the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia, Charow made his mark in the energy industry, working with Amoco and later as BP's Vice President for Russia. Charow's deep understanding of Russian politics, culture and the changing legal environment was invaluable as he helped negotiate and manage some of the most important energy partnerships between Russian and Western companies. Noting the shift from the 1990s to Putin's tighter control of the energy sector in the 2000s, he [observes](#) that business in Russia is:

“... all about relationships, and how you formed the relationships, and how you maintain them and sustain them over long periods of time. It's also about understanding what the rules of the game are. The rules of the game changed radically from the '90s to the 2000s.”

Academic Disciplines and Risk Aversion

In the post-Soviet era, area studies is said to have fallen out of favor relative to rising security studies institutes or the traditional disciplines like political science. Yet, as Tim Frye [pointed out](#), he and many others were afforded new opportunities to integrate post-Communist cases into fields like Comparative Politics and Political Economy.

There was also substantial disagreement on whether the institute and area experts should be involved in guiding economic and political reforms in post-Communist states. Western expertise was sought on issues like designing constitutions, structuring privatization programs and building capital markets. Interestingly, these roles were filled by non-area experts. The Harvard Institute for International Development provided a platform to academics to advise USAID-sponsored reforms in Russia, but a similar role for Harriman did not materialize. Richard Ericson, economist and director from 1992-1995, [spoke](#) of the Institute's relatively conservative approach, despite pressure from the university to find a private-sector role. Proposals were floated to make Harriman more “business-friendly,” but they lacked necessary faculty buy-in, connections, and corporate sponsorship to work.

By the mid-1990s, the university stopped replacing retiring and departing faculty, while Ford and SSRC pulled away from their longstanding commitments. The School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) was developing an identity as a functional-based professional school, with area studies increasingly marginalized from its mission,

curricular planning, and critical institutional decisions. Students interested in Russian and Eurasian issues were encouraged to gain expertise in security, political development and finance, rather than interdisciplinary training in the region. Even those most sympathetic to area studies agreed that a “rebalancing” of academic emphasis was required for area studies to stay relevant in an era of globalization. However, there was very little pushback, as Padma Desai [pointed out](#), even when non-area experts immersed themselves in the extraordinarily impactful but disruptive reforms in Russia and throughout the region.

A Second Chance – Academia and Policy

The current deterioration in U.S.-Russian relations and heightened coverage of Russia in the media point to the pressing need to restore contextual knowledge to the way we study and understand the region.

First, providing relevant and rigorous regional training should be divorced from nostalgia about a so-called Golden Era. Whatever merits there are to perceptions of a better time, area studies itself needs to evolve and address the needs of the current era. Our narrators explain how language, literature, anthropology, and historical context are critical for informed analysis and, ultimately, sound advice to policymakers. Area studies champions cannot remain passive about this.

Second, it is time to fundamentally expand and redraw the boundaries of what we consider to be the region. Just as history has made an important turn towards global perspectives, the field of area studies is greatly enriched when it embraces the region’s transnational communities, including diasporas, exiles, oligarchs, refugees, dual nationals, and cultural emissaries. The relationship between the Ukrainian diaspora in North America and the conflict back home, Tashkent’s current tapping of second-generation Uzbeks in New York to assist the current reforms, and the mobilization of anti-Putin exile communities are all important trends that fundamentally interact with the region. Cities like New York, Paris, Berlin, and Istanbul have historically served as hubs of exile political and cultural life.

Finally, it is critical to note new sites for “policy relevance,” especially as professional schools become guardians of standards, norms and research that directly affect the region. Schools of law, public health, business, social work, and higher education all train professional experts and specialists in fieldwork. Partnerships with area studies institutes are a natural fit. For example, collaborations with journalism schools on issues like disinformation and propaganda, the role of state-sponsored media, and online influence can provide area experts new ways to make their impact—even if traditional policymakers are not currently listening to them.

The Harriman Institute Oral History Project was commissioned by Alexander Cooley, designed by George Gavrilis, and implemented by Mary Marshall Clark, director of the Columbia Center for Oral History. A resource for historians, faculty, students, policymakers and professionals, the full transcripts of the oral history interviews can be accessed at <http://oralhistory.harriman.columbia.edu/>.

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